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PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN MEDICINE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This work provides a philosophical examination of the relevance of African traditional medicine (ATM) in contemporary Nigeria, exploring its cultural, ethical, and epistemological dimensions. It investigates how traditional medicine, rooted in African cosmology and indigenous knowledge systems, continues to address the healthcare needs of many Nigerians despite advancements in modern medicine. The study highlights the holistic approach of ATM, which integrates physical, spiritual, and social well-being, and its alignment with the communal values of African societies. It also critiques the challenges facing traditional medicine, including issues of scientific validation, regulation, and integration with Western medical practices. Through a philosophical lens, this paper argues for the preservation and modernization of ATM while emphasizing its potential to complement modern healthcare systems. By analyzing the interplay between tradition and innovation, the study underscores the enduring relevance of African traditional medicine in addressing Nigeria's healthcare challenges.

Keywords: Philosophy, African, Medicine, Religion, Ethics

Introduction

African medicine has long been woven into the daily life of communities across Nigeria. It offers more than healing practices; it carries a worldview shaped by generations of observation, experience, and cultural memory. Even with the growth of modern biomedical systems, many Nigerians continue to rely on traditional remedies, rituals, and herbal knowledge for both physical and spiritual well-being. This enduring trust raises important philosophical questions about the nature of health, the meaning of healing, and the place of indigenous knowledge within a rapidly modernizing society. A philosophical examination of African medicine allows us to examine how traditional healing expresses deeper ideas about the human person, community responsibility, moral order, and the

connection between the natural and spiritual realms. It also invites reflection on issues such as evidence, efficacy, cultural identity, and the limits of Western biomedical models. By analyzing these themes, it becomes possible to understand why African medicine remains relevant in Nigeria today and how it might coexist, complement, or challenge contemporary health systems.

A General Overview of Traditional Medicine

The art and science of medicine, as we know is concerned with the prevention and cure of disease. Disease itself involves illness, which includes the disorder of the body, mind, or of plants. Human beings from early times often find themselves diseased. Medicine, therefore, is said to be the genesis of man's good health here on earth. There are as many definitions of medicine as there are scholars, but one common definition is that it is "a substance, whether liquid, solid, or powder, that can be introduced into the body of a living organism for good health (Bernal, 32). This is one among many definitions of medicine, but one thing remains obvious and that is, it is concerned with the cure of diseases and the provision of a good health condition. Since medicine is said to be as old as man, it will not be easy to give a correct and specific time and place as regards the origin of medicine. Many scholars have refused to agree with a steady outline of the rise and development of medical thought. They have argued that no rigid classification can be applied to the history of medicine and the story cannot be unfolded as a steadily progressive series of events. This notwithstanding, the history of medicine can be said to be the account of man's attempt to deal with human illness and diseases from the primitive attempts of pre-literate man to the present complex array of specialties and treatments.

Although it is argued that there were many great men before the ancient Greeks and that the healing art was taught and practiced before the tale of the Greeks, they are still considered the starting point of medicine. This is so because of the Greeks' spirit of rational inquiry and the introduction of the practice of observation and reasoning regarding disease. The method of rational interpretation and discussion lent itself to teaching and thus to the formation of schools which taught medical education. The formation of schools led to the rise of universities in places like Italy. Oxford and other places; therefore, the art and science of medicine spread to areas where it was unknown. This was encouraged through the teaching of medicine by some medical practitioners who later took up lectureship and professorship appointments in the various universities. Thus, because of the Greeks' spirit of rational inquiry and the rational interpretation they accorded to medicine, one could be justified in saying that they started medicine proper, with scholars like Hippocrates who introduced "the Hippocratic Oath".

This is observed in medical practice to date. One can only trace an outline of the rise and development of medical thought and practice owing to the vast nature of the subject of medicine. For the purpose of this project, therefore, we shall look at a brief culture of the development and progress of medicine from the earliest times. But we should note that "It has had many developments and setbacks and is best understood as a chapter of epoch simple narrative rather than as medicine developed from medicine and surgery in the primitive times to, medicine in the 18th century then to medicine in the 20th century and surgery in the 20 century. All these phases have their own contribution to the development of medicine. It is not easy to understand medicine in the primitive and prehistoric times because its story was unwritten. But "it seems probable that man, as soon as he had reached the stage of reasoning, discovered, by the process of trial and error, which plants might be used as food, which of them were poisonous and which of them had medicinal value. Medicine then consists largely of vegetable products or herbs. Man then attributed uncommon, serious and disabling disease to a supernatural origin. This led to some very curious methods of treatment, which were aimed at luring an errant soul, which is believed to have been extracted or displaced by an evil spirit, back to its original and normal state; one such method is called the method of trepanning. Into this period falls traditional medicine and surgery in the Orient, which include Indian medicine and Chinese medicine. Indian medicine in the ancient period was rich in magical practices for the treatment of disease. The Hindu religion influenced Indian medicine a lot; the Hindu believed that the body contained three elementary substances called spirit, phlegm and bile, which, they say, are microcosmic

representatives of the three divine universal forces. Health depends on the normal balance of these three elementary substances. Drugs considered were mainly vegetable drugs, all indigenous plants.

The Hindu physician collected and prepared their own vegetable drugs, which were also mixed with animal remedies like milk and bones, including minerals like sulfur. Some of these drugs, like "cardamom" and "linnamon," eventually appeared in Western pharmacopeias. Chinese system of medicine is said to be of great antiquity and, as such, independent of any recorded external influences. Chinese medicine has three points of interest: moxibustion and drugs, acupuncture. The medical material is very extensive and consists of vegetable, animal (including human) and mineral remedies. In prescribing, there is often the element of sympathetic magic. Some drugs were taken over from Western medicine, among which are rhubarb (for anemia), Castor oil, kaolin, aconite, camphor and cannabis sativa (Indian hemp). Moxibustion is the burning of cones of Wormwood leaves on designated anatomical spots. It is by the medical materials like expected that, through these spots, diseases are killed and illness cured.

Acupuncture consists of the insertion of needles of various metal shapes and sizes into one or several spots in the body, specified for the purpose, the human trunk, the extremities and the head. Acupuncture has been used for a wide variety of diseases, especially for the treatment of arthritis, headaches, convulsions, lethargy, and others. It is supposed to relieve internal congestion and to restore the equilibrium of the bodily functions. The practice became popular and continued in use in France and Germany and was later introduced in the United States. Medicine thus developed from early Greek and Roman medicine to the 18th century. The 19th century saw the rise of scientific medicine, which consisted of the verification of the germ theory, medicine, and anesthesia. This gave footing to the inspiration of researchers to research on other branches of medicine. Medicine in 20th century led to the discovery of sulfonamide drugs, antibiotics, tetanus antitoxin, and advances in other fields. The 20th century also saw an advance in surgery; the scope of surgery widened and as such there was a need for specialization. It became clear that for surgeons to achieve progress in certain areas, they have to give their attention to that particular area. This did not apply only to surgery; it applied also to medicine. Medicine is no longer divided into three parts, namely medicine, surgery and obstetrics as it was in the 19th century. It is subdivided into very many smaller branches, each of them a life-work for the specialist. This specialization is due to the changing and complex nature of medicine, which is necessitated by the changing and complex nature of the world and its inhabitants. Karl Marx has taught us to know that every epoch or event is a result of the preceding epoch and that some aspects of the past are contained in the present. It is obvious then that it is from the result—whether failure or success of the present that we tend to research into the future. In the case of medicine, therefore, the results of the early centuries have led to discoveries in these later centuries, which have always been necessary to suit the changing environment. Although medicine has had its setbacks, it is clear that it is making a progressive seen from its historical development. This can be development from the earliest times to the present day and its achievements so far. For now, still in the 20th century, discoveries are being made regarding diseases and their cures. This motivates researchers to make some progressive achievements in research to suit the changing environment. To truly understand the ideology of Western medicine, you have to take a look at the language used by doctors. The importance of medicine is so clear that it doesn't need to be over-stressed. Medicine deals directly with man, who is at the center of the universe. It treats man with respect and value and considers man as the center of all activities in the universe. Medicine has both social and economic importance. It is through the study of medicine that medical practitioners have been able to realize the importance of a healthy environment. It is understood that an unhealthy environment could cause health hazards, which will make social life in any particular environment unbearable. Human beings are advised to live a comfortable life by keeping their environment clean. Medicine has helped to restore sanity in our lives and environment in trying to fight the ills of society. These are made possible through the Government's introduction of the cleanup exercise and the campaign against

drug abuse and drug peddling in Nigeria. The Government thought all these were necessary because of its intention to achieve health for all Nigerians.

Had it not been for the improvement of research in the area of medicine the world would be the best example of hell. This is because the rate of increase of infectious killer diseases is alarmingly high. Medicine and surgery in this 20 century has made it possible for practitioners to be able to probe into the inner anatomy of human beings and as such, make man know himself better. Medical practices have also brought harmony among the individual practitioners in their different specialties. The practitioners come together to discuss the provision of health and wellbeing for mankind. This leads us to the issue of the economic importance of medicine. According to the Marxist philosophy, it is social wellbeing that determines social consciousness. A nation with an unsound health condition for the citizens will definitely not be able to produce anything good. The government and citizens of any nation have to be physically and mentally sound if it should introduce and implement good policies. Every nation needs adequate manpower both mentally and physically so as to provide the economic wellbeing of its citizenry and the nation in general. One of the factors of production in every economy is labour, which is divided into mental and manual labour. Medicine helps to provide better and healthier manual and mental labour, which in turn helps the growth of every economy.

The importance of medicine therefore is made clear through its aims and objectives. It is also the aims and objectives of the practice of medicine that inspired the United Nations Organization (U.N.O.), to form or inaugurate the World Health Organization (W.H.O.), which is trying to provide health for almost all the countries of the world. In Nigeria, for instance, some organs of the W.H.O. have been trying to provide good health for everybody, extending it to even those in the rural areas. Programmes like the Expanded Programme on Immunization (E.P.I.), Oral Rehydration Therapy (O.R.T.), the yellow fever vaccine inoculation programme and numerous others are the brainchild of the World Health Organization. This organization aims at providing better health conditions for the people of the world through medical practice and advice. Thus, medicine has made it possible for human beings to realize the important position they occupy in the universe and in their society particularly. It has also been a source of wellbeing and harmony among individuals who understand its importance.

What is African medicine?

This question is directed towards the definition, characteristics and aims of African medicine. One cannot give a direct and distinct definition of African medicine. This is because medicine generally is considered to be one, universally. Differences might arise only about the area of practice and the epoch that one refers to. From this angle, therefore, we see African medicine concerned also with the prevention and cure of diseases. The question that comes to mind here is, why is it referred to as African medicine? To answer this question, one can say that, in a society where the art of healing or medicine is practiced with respect and regard to the African values and beliefs of such a society, medicine in this place can be called African medicine; this is in the context of such a society. In the case of our study here, African medicine is regarded in Nigeria, particularly among the Mbube people, as 'Herbalism'. It is called herbalism because all the major things required for African medical practice are believed to come from herbs. According to native Doctor Ojie Obi, "the tablets, capsules and syrups and other concoctions used for medicinal purposes are made from herbs, even among Orthodox practitioners." I strongly believe that herbal medicine was the main source of health care before the introduction of orthodox medicine and even refined medicine came from herbs.

African medicine, in the context of this paper, is referred to as herbalism, which means a system of curing ills and diseases using herbs which are believed to possess curative powers. Just as herbs are used for medical purposes by the herbalist, so they are used in producing tablets and syrups used in orthodox medicine. The herbalist processes these herbs also and certifies them for human consumption. A point of note here is an explication by Native Doctor Ojie Obi. He brought out a bottle containing a white substance, which he says is herb that has been ground to become a powdered

substance that can be equated to any kind of capsule and this substance tastes exactly like a capsule. He also brought out another powdered substance which is reddish in colour and mixed it with the white one and added a little water; it became exactly like a pure blood tonic, which is what, he says, it is. He says they can serve as a blood tonic and that the substances individually can be used as a good curative for a particular or various diseases and illnesses, as the case may be.

African medicine can therefore be understood as a system of medical practice operative in a community for the prevention and cure of diseases based on the customs, beliefs and values of such a community. The traditional medicine man regards the soul as the most important aspect of a human being. He believes that if a doctor can manipulate the soul, he can then administer a successful treatment upon his patient, having conquered the troubling spirit and claimed the soul. In traditional medicine, one has to develop his spiritual self so that he will be able to manipulate his patient's spirit. Doctor Ojie Obi avers that the practitioners of orthodox medicine are hypocritical because they cannot conclusively deny the involvement of spiritual activity in their practice. This is because the herbalist identifies the spirit we are talking about as the soul, which is regarded as vital for human existence. This enables him to develop the spiritual and mental prowess that will aid him in medicine.

The Development and Progress of African Medicine

Traditional (African) medicine since then has been growing steadily till the advent of white men into African medicine. The orthodox (Western) European rejected our traditional medicine, saying that it is raw, unrefined and unscientific. Then they tried to impose orthodox medicine on the men existing in those early days, but they were met with stiff opposition by those men who introduced the practice and wanted to preserve the traditional values of the African people. The white people started looking for strategies to employ so as to establish orthodox medicine. They started by setting up churches through which they preached against the establishment of gods in a shrine to cure diseases and by that they won many followers. This made it possible for them to carry on forcefully their campaign against traditional medicine because their followers were meant to agree with all their views. The Europeans started using arms that were much superior to the Dane guns used by our forefathers in those days; these men surrendered and decided not to practice for sometimes, that is, they went on strike action. Later, when Europeans realized it was not possible and would be mere foolishness to totally eradicate traditional (African) medicine, they relaxed their interference and the traditional medicine men came back to work when they saw the white men had realized their folly.

This interference helped the progressive development of traditional (African) medicine because it geared the traditional medicine men into more action since they now foresaw stiff opposition and competition. There were cases of illnesses which could not be treated with orthodox medicine and they were referred to traditional medicine men. Orthodox medicine therefore gave prominence to traditional medicine and stimulated its progress. As traditional medicine spread, lazy and dubious practitioners started springing up. These people claim to know everything concerning herbalism, while in the real sense they lack adequate knowledge, but they still go on practicing for selfish aims. These individuals, at one time or the other retard the pace of the growth and development of traditional (African) medicine. Due to the efficacy of traditional (African) medicine in curing some illnesses which have been declared incurable by the Orthodox (Western) medicine, traditional medical cure is being recommended even by the orthodox medical associations and Health Bodies in the country. Traditional medicine has since then been growing steadily with every passing day, although with some hindrances and setbacks.

Importance of African Medicine

The practice of traditional (African) medicine or herbalism has been of immense importance to the people of Africa. The importance of herbalism could be traced to the time before the advent of European and Orthodox (Western) medicine. At that period, different kinds of diseases or illnesses were cured by using leaves and bark of a tree. Honey, palm oil, human bones, roots, etc., by the

herbalists existing then. The people of Mbube were rarely victims of serious infectious diseases because local methods of immunization existed and were used. According to native doctor Ojie Obi, during the civil war in Nigeria, the war was prevented from affecting the people of Mbube; almost the whole Igbo people ran to this place to take refuge and they were saved. This was made possible by discharging bullets from the human body by the use of local herbs. There is a kind of palm tree. It develops bunches that are never ripe; it is allowed to decay and dry, then it is mixed with other herbs from the forest and cooked. When it is cooked, it will be a very powerful concoction that can drive away evil spirits and set up different kinds of this concoction is put into guns and impulse on people, shot upward in the direction war I intense. The smoke is believed to mix with thin air and travel to the area of the enemy; when the enemy decides to approach Mbube, they will instantly decide otherwise. The people of Mbube stand to gain from the competition and orthodoxy that exists between the herbalist practitioners because each side will try to prove it is best. In the areas of Orthopedics, herbalists in Mbube are known for their ability to deal with such cases effectively and with excellence and this is seen from the number of people who have reported being cured of one fractured bone or the other by herbalists in Mbube, with the use of leaves, roots and human bones.

Traditional (African) medicine has helped the people of Mbube in molding their lives. Since the herbalists attributed certain diseases or illnesses to spiritual sources, the people always heed the warnings of these herbalists against certain 'immoral' behaviours which might be detrimental to their health. Traditional (African) medicine has also, to a great extent, helped the people of Mbube in cherishing and preserving their culture and values. It is known that orthodox medical doctors visit the herbal homes and that most of those who deny visiting herbalists do so in secret. We should not forget the fact that some severe diseases that are not Curable by orthodox medicine are referred to the herbalists, and they come out with a successful and favourable result. By implication, the patronage of traditional medicine by the people depends on their traditional belief system. It is cheap, reliable, efficacious and potent. In a nutshell, traditional medicine is widely patronized and supported in spite of the prevailing interest in Western medicine in Africa.

The Philosophical Foundation for African Medicine

I have pointed out in this piece of work that in any treatment, it is essential to seek the Cause of the illness. The traditional medical doctors in Africa seek the root and the cause of the ailment before treating their client. And it is in this guise that certain incantations are essential in combination with herbal preparation for effective therapy. Some practices in traditional medicine, such as incantation, divination, and ritual methods of cure, are difficult to understand and cannot be verified scientifically with scientific paradigms. For this reason, these practices are regarded with suspicion by modern scientists as well as society. Finally, the philosophical significance thereby means the belief or efficacy an African has that Honey can be used on him to cure wounds in the body, Herbs to cure several sicknesses, a cock or hen can be used when a human being is confronted with a fracture, the cock can be deformed and, in the same vein, used in massaging the cock while the human fracture will be healing accordingly.

(i) The Metaphysical Foundation

In Africa generally, there are some metaphysical foundations behind traditional medicine practice, which I am going to examine here. Traditional medicine, which is as old as man himself, springs from the assiduous belief and culture of the people. Traditional medical practice has metaphysical foundations behind the practice which pertaining to metaphysics; people believe in the existence of two worlds, the world of man and the spirit world and one is as real as the other. The spirits or ancestors serve as a bridge that ensures a smooth flow of transcendental traffic between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. They are believed to be the best (ancestors) group of intermediaries between men and God because they are midway between the spirit world and the human world. The practices are not open to all, and whosoever wants to practice undergoes certain secret training. To an ordinary person in the society, the traditional medical doctor is next to god. Due to its mysterious

nature, certain herbs are given a particular time, maybe in the day or in the night, but usually hours like 6.00 am, 3.00 pm, 6.00 pm (day); at night is usually 12.00 am and 3.00 am, when certain curative sacrifices are always made by these hours because it is believed that that is the time spirits come out from the world of the living dead to the world of the living. And any restorative act done during that period is more effective.

(ii) The Epistemological Foundation

The epistemological involved the knowledge that a dirty environment causes contaminated water causes diseases and also contaminated diseases, involved food causes diseases, etc., which all will lead to ailments (sicknesses) in the human body. The available modern health care facilities include a maternity hospital, a child welfare clinic and a dispensary. These facilities are allocated in the same premises, which is 2 kilometers from the village. These facilities are expected to cater for a projected population of a certain number of people.

According to William Cockerham, in his book titled *Medical Sociology*, "What the typical patient wants is easy, quick, reliable access to a source of care". "But it is reliable that 'provision of health care services, particularly specialized ones, "are more readily accessible to the urban than to the rural population. People don't receive better treatment at times in modern medical delivery; for instance, the kind of treatment given to a pregnant woman in labour is not good, like slapping and beating the woman. As a result of this, "Western-inspired medical delivery system insufficient care even in central areas and virtually no care at all in extensive rural areas" (196).

William Cockerham further stresses that the cost of obtaining modern and traditional healing is a determining factor in obtaining any type of medical treatment. As W. Cockerham puts it, "No other single issue in medicine has attracted more public attention in recent years than rising cost of health care and the diminished ability of certain segments of society to obtain health services adequate for other needs" (198).

Conclusion

From the critical study done in this work, one can say that traditional medicine, as an application of African science, is very significant. It is no doubt not as developed and refined as orthodox medicine, but its growing existence cannot be ignored or underestimated. Traditional medicine helps a lot, especially in the rural areas where the majority of the occupants are mainly old and poor people. This is a cheaper way for them to cure ailments; some don't even go to herbalists or native doctors. They cure ailments by gathering materials around them, usually plants, animals, etc., for treatment without incurring any monetary cost. Moreover, some old people don't like going to the hospital or taking drugs and injections; they depend on herbs or natural substances and this works effectively for them. In contrast to this, there are some beliefs and practices in traditional medicine that are due to ignorance. Since I cannot deny the reality of witchcraft, ancestral spirits and water deities as being the cause of ailments, it should also be known that ailments may be due to malnutrition, poor environment condition, or not taking proper Care of the treatment of a certain ailment, because there are some sicknesses which are supposed to be treated using orthodox medicine, but due to ignorance, the patient depends on traditional herbs which eventually kill the person. Instead of accepting the simple truth of the cause of the person's death, they attribute it to a spiritual attack, or even "remote control". The comparison of traditional and orthodox medicine helped in showing the strong resemblance between traditional medicine and orthodox medicine, with differences arising only due to differences in worldview. People should try to understand that there is nothing wrong with modern

healing; the difference is that everything is modernized. All these drugs, injections, and antibiotics are made from plants and everything is in a state of flux because there must be development.

Moreover, people should understand that there are certain things that cannot be done traditionally. For instance, blood, appendicitis (operation), etc.; there is a need for a medical doctor to handle such cases because modern doctors are more specialized in handling physical ailments than traditional doctors. Though traditional doctors treat a person with such cases of hernia, appendix, piles, etc., with a concoction that the person diffuses through excretion. Thus, traditional medicine, by its own right and standard, is a science, though in a developing stage, growing towards the most civilized stage of development, which I shall call the advanced scientific stage. There is a need for integrating traditional medicine and orthodox medicine so that, in cases where there are spiritual and physical forces, both can handle it successfully. People should be taking the appropriate medicine or drugs as directed by both traditional and orthodox doctors at the appropriate time to avoid drug abuse. So, in final analysis, the traditional (African) medicine method of healing is nearer to the patients, cheaper, and more important compared to orthodox medicine. Even when patients these days go for tests and surgical operations, the number of deaths recorded is more than when Africans were using traditional medicine for healing (curing) people.

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